

Three Disciplines, a Common First Year: Beginnings and Other Thresholds

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I. Introduction

One advantage of environmental design schools that offer multiple disciplinary paths is the opportunity to begin with a common first year. These range in diversity, depending on whether the spectrum of disciplines includes the arts, as well as design. This paper addresses the situation at programs in which the students are all headed toward professional degrees such as architecture, landscape architecture or planning, or similarly-focused areas of study, for which the first year is the threshold. These are 'pre-disciplinary' students in our program, although many of them come in with a profession in mind they intend to pursue. They don't, however, 'declare' a major until near the end of the year, and faculty generally avoid framing studio projects by discipline.

But this is a difficult neutrality to maintain. Our texts for studio courses more often have 'architect' in the title than not, and there is sometimes debate about projects that seem to favor or 'promote' one profession over others. There is sometimes tension in distinguishing between foundation learning versus that which is common to all of the disciplines, versus attempts to model what a practicing architect or planner does. The latter seems very problematic: how can a beginning student see or think or design in ways that produce true knowledge of professional practice? When and where in the curriculum, then, should disciplinarity be introduced; what is the most constructive framework for it in the learning experience?

For me, these issues raised questions about where the incoming students were, at the starting point. What were their ideas about each of the three professions as they come into the program, and what were the sources of that information or impressions? How might that change by the end of the fall semester, and what aspects of the program or environment were shaping the students' inclination to pursue one of the degree programs over other choices? Further, what about the sophomores, who at the same point in time would have completed their first semesters in their professional programs – how would they reflect on the basis for their choices, and regard the success of their decisions? These and other questions formed the basis for a series of three surveys, one given to incoming first year students, and the other two given at the end of fall semester, one to the first years, and the other to sophomores. Their responses are the core of this paper: what they know at different stages of the program about each discipline, the sources of those perceptions of knowledge, and what has influenced their choices of major.

As context, a brief introduction follows of the program at Ball State University's College of Architecture, with a description of the survey project and the three questionnaires. *The College of Architecture and Planning* at Ball State University began in 1966 as a degree program in architecture that soon added landscape architecture and planning, then historic preservation,

and graduate degrees in all disciplines. The Common First Year has been in place as a foundation year since the programs were expanded. On successful completion, students apply to enter one of the professional programs in their second year: architecture, landscape architecture or planning.

The first year curriculum in the College has three areas of learning: studio and design communications/media courses, each in a two-semester sequence, and one lecture course – the ‘100 series’ -- in each of the disciplines that is taken by all students. The latter introduces each profession, and includes some historical and theoretical background, as well as present-day issues. Each of the departments ‘contributes’ faculty to the first year, headed by the Associate Dean and coordinated by two faculty members who teach at least one course in First Year each semester. The faculty is a mix of tenured and tenure-track, and some very dedicated contract appointments. In the fall, as many as ten faculty teach five sections of each of the concurrent studio-based courses; a section is typically seventeen students at the beginning of fall semester. In the spring, another three sections are added who do their second semesters over the summer.

How is disciplinarity currently present in this program? First, by the professional diversity of the faculty, and by the content of the 100 series courses. Texts, readings, and examples shown in presentations, workshops and project-specific lectures for studio are a second place in which the professions are represented. In the earliest studio exercises, for example, city plans are used to illustrate ordering ideas that span scale, and as examples of figure-ground studies. Third, the College lecture series includes speakers from all disciplines, and first year students attend, make sketches and take notes for different discussion forums.

This is a rich learning environment with many participants who make efforts to work on a basis of consensus and mutual respect. But there are bound to be tensions and controversies – this is the pool of students who will people each department’s sophomore year. There is also concern that the students have good exposure to the nature and scope of each of the three programs – both for awareness of the contributions of each to the collective built environment, as well as to help students make informed decisions for their futures. Another source of influence on the scope and content of the first year comes from second year faculty: to cover certain issues, skills and processes that are perceived as basic, a list that tends to grow rather than shrink. Discussion about disciplinarity tends to focus around three questions: whether faculty members are ‘recruiting’ the better students in a competitive way; whether studio and graphics projects are more ‘about’ one discipline than another [more the case in the second semester]; and about the balance of abstraction vs. greater ‘reality’ in projects. Other issues aside, as projects become more literal there can be a tendency to become more discipline-specific.

A note: for the purposes of this paper and this research, the noun ‘discipline’ – a particularly rich entry in the OED, both as definition and etymology – is taken to reference one of a distinct type of vocational professional practices, ie, that content, practice, authors or projects are attributed, for example, as being architecture or landscape architecture.

II THE SURVEYS

An initial survey was developed for the incoming students, to be given in the first few days of class. A second survey was given to the same group at the end of fall semester. Also at the end of fall semester a third survey was given to the Second Year students, asking how they felt

about the choices they'd made and whether their major was a good fit.ⁱ This section of the paper deals with discipline-related questions on each survey, and is followed by discussion of the findings.

A. Freshman entry survey

As a way to examine one aspect of their knowledge of the scope of each profession, the survey asked students to list all of the designers and planners whose names or practices they knew, both historic and contemporary.ⁱⁱ

7 List all of the designers and planners whose names/practice you know [historic and contemporary].

Architects	Landscape Architects	Planners

Figure 1. Excerpt from Fall Entry survey.

They were also asked, in a subsequent part of the survey, about the source/s of their knowledge of the design professions, for example, whether from books, magazines, or other media. Many students supplied alternative sources, and that material has been coded and will be discussed. [Questions about their intended majors were not posed at this time.]

B. Freshman follow-up survey

This survey was administered to the same group of students at the end of fall semester, to examine their perceptions of their own progress, and the extent of their [perceived] understanding of each of the three disciplines.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	StronglyDisagree
I have made good progress this semester gaining an understanding of...					
1. the foundation skills and tools of the design professions	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤
2. what Architecture is	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤
3. what Landscape Architecture is	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤
4. what Planning is	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤

Figure 2. Excerpt from Freshman follow-up survey.

Later in the survey, they were asked about their original choice of major on entry into the program, whether that had changed, and what they now thought their choice of major would be at the end of the year. This was followed by a list of possible sources of influence, and students were asked to mark all that applied, and to note which had been the most influential.

C. Second-year follow-up survey

This survey was given to those who had spent the fall semester in the department of their choice of majors, and contained questions similar to those in the Freshman follow-up survey: their current major versus their original idea, and sources of influence. Students were also asked whether their perceptions about what the major would be like were fulfilled, and whether they thought the fit was good: had it been a good choice?

2. What is currently your major program of study?

☐ Arch ☐ LA ☐ Planning

3. What major did you have in mind when you initially enrolled in CAP?

☐ Arch ☐ LA ☐ Planning ☐ Undecided

4. What influenced your choice of major? Check all that apply, but please mark two checks next to the one that was the most important in influencing your choice.

- ☐ learning about the different professions in my 100 course/s
- ☐ doing the projects in studio
- ☐ talking to other students
- ☐ talking to faculty members
- ☐ going on the CAP First Year field trip
- ☐ talking with family members
- ☐ perception that my choice may best suit my personality or abilities
- ☐ perception that my choice may mean better pay in the future (than other CAP programs)
- ☐ perception that my choice may be considered more prestigious (than other CAP programs)
- ☐ I have friends in this program
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Other, please list: _____

Figure 3. Excerpt from Sophomore follow-up survey.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. The freshman entry survey

The second page of the survey began with a question about their knowledge of designers and planners. The coding system was developed afterward to analyze the results. The categories may seem arbitrary, but intended to show the distinction between those designers/planners whose work was clearly in the past – looked “historic” -- and what was modern in the sense of looking “contemporary” to a high school graduate, even though it may have been designed or built prior to 1920. ‘Modernist’ and ‘currently practicing’ were lumped together to include both

the modernists in the true sense of the designation, and designers, famous or not, who were actively practicing.ⁱⁱⁱ In the 'Architect' category, Frank Lloyd Wright has his own category, due to the number of respondents who included him in their listings. In general, the iconic founders of each profession were well represented, but Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham were mentioned far fewer times than Wright.

• Architects categories

1 Historic architects [deceased prior to 1920]	31
2 Modernist and currently practicing architects	51
3 Not an architect	0
4 Frank Lloyd Wright	66
TOTAL, ARCHITECTS	148 = 77%

• Landscape Architect categories

1 Historic landscape architects [deceased prior to 1920]	12
2 Modernist and currently practicing landscape architects	9
3 Not a landscape architect	2
TOTAL, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS	23 = 13%

• Planners categories

1 Historic planners [deceased prior to 1920]	7
2 Modernist and currently practicing planners	2
3 Not a planner	1
TOTAL, PLANNERS	10 = 5%

Figure 4. Responses to Designers/Planners question on the Freshman entry survey.

A total of about 88 students turned the survey in, with 11 filling in no names at all, for a total of 181 names. Of the total, about 77% are architects, 13% landscape architects, and 5% planners [the non-respondents were also 5%].

The next group of questions dealt with how or where students found their information about the environmental design professions.

12 What have you read, about any of the design professions, that has influenced you in deciding to enter a design/planning program? [If not a book or article, have you been influenced by something you saw/heard in another medium –such as a movie or television program?]

Figure 5. Question about sources of information on the Freshman entry survey.

As with the names of designers/planners, we had not wanted to 'prompt' the students' responses, so the results were also coded after the fact, by reviewing the surveys. This resulted in ten categories, with additional categories for none [they said 'none' or its equivalent], 'didn't answer' and 'other.' The 88 students at the beginning of fall semester gave a total of 95 content-responses [subtracting the 'none' and 'didn't answer' responses].

1. book	2. mag. or other print media	3. internet source	4. television program or character	5. other pictorial media [slide show, movie, other]	6. high school counselor or teacher, or class project	7. parents	8. family friend or relative	9. talked to a profess. or practitioner	10. CAP high school workshop	11. none	12. didn't answ.	13. other
12	12	4	22	7	11	5	1	4	1	3	2	11
13%	13%		23%	7%	12%	5%						12%

Figure 6. Coding of results for question about sources of information on the Freshman entry survey.

The highest response, 23%, came from television -- a program, a character in a series, or a channel such as HGTV. (Programs on HGTV were prominent in this category.) Examples students cited were the character George, from *Seinfeld*, and the father on the *Brady Bunch*.^{iv} The next most-represented, at 13% each, were books, magazines and other print media, and 'other pictorial media.' In the print media category *Architectural Digest* was the most consistently mentioned. The category of 'other pictorial media,' such as movies or slide shows, was interesting for the number of recent movies with landscape architects as main characters. In the 'other' category [11%], there was mention of childhood play with Legos, a memorable building, use of software such as *Sim City* or house design programs, a job experience, and wanting to make a contribution for the better good of the world.

B. Follow-up surveys

Two follow-up surveys were given at the end of fall semester, one to the freshmen, and a second to sophomores who had completed their first semesters in their chosen disciplines. The freshman survey asked about progress in understanding of each of the professions, and what they felt they knew about each [without being specific about what that knowledge might entail]. Both this survey and the one given to the sophomores asked about the initial choice of major, versus how that may have changed, and what factors had been influential. The additional

disciplinary questions in the sophomore survey addressed their perceptions of the program they'd chosen as compared with their experience of the reality, and their satisfaction with the fit.

In response to the question "*I have made good progress this semester in gaining an understanding of what ...*" students answered the following:

Architecture is: 88% agreed or strongly agreed [undecided = 11%]

Landscape architecture is: 79% agreed or strongly agreed [undecided = 20%]

Planning is: 64% agreed or strongly agreed [undecided = 27%]

The confidence expressed by these high numbers, at a point when not all students had taken all of the 100 series courses,^v is surprising, but explanations can be theorized. Students tend to come into the program with a greater general awareness of architecture, which would account for the very high percent claiming 'understanding'. Most students entering the program have had little prior exposure to landscape architecture and planning as professional disciplines. But during the fall semester of studio-related lectures and examples, they are exposed to a full range of work by practitioners in all three disciplines, and have been on a four-day field trip to Chicago that balances architectural examples with urban landscapes and urban design.

Freshmen and sophomores were asked similar questions about the status of their disciplinary choices, and the responses were fairly consistent.

- Freshmen, initial choice of profession:
85% Architecture; 15% L Arch; 0 Planning
- Sophomores, memory of initial choices of profession on entry:
78% Architecture; 12% L Arch; 3% Planning
[note: about 7% of sophomore respondents didn't answer this question]

Both groups were asked about their current program choices – which for the freshmen was whether their thinking had changed in one semester, as they don't 'declare' until late in March, and don't formally apply until late April. For this group, the highest interest was in architecture, three times that of the group interested in Landscape Architecture. However, 27% of the students didn't answer this question, and some of those 'undecideds' probably later turned to planning.

- The freshmen -- intent at the end of fall semester:
75% Architecture; 24% L Arch; 0 Planning

The sophomores, thinking back to their entry into the program in the prior year gave a similar picture as the entering freshmen, but showed considerable contrast in terms of the choices they ultimately made.^{vi}

- The sophomores' current programs were:
51% Architecture; 32% L Arch; 17% Planning

It's clear that the second semester, duration of time in the program, taking the complete set of 100 courses, and the terminal project in the studio -- which is comprehensive in scope -- are influencing the group that ultimately chooses Planning as a degree path.

The next section of the survey addressed influences on the choice of discipline. The same list was used for both surveys, with students asked to check all responses that applied. Both groups checked an average of four items. The example shown below is from the sophomore survey, which additionally asked for a 'most important' influence.

What influenced your choice of major? Check all that apply, but please mark two checks next to the one that was the most important in influencing your choice.

- ⑤ learning about the different professions in my 100 course/s
 - ⑤ doing the projects in studio
 - ⑤ talking to other students
 - ⑤ talking to faculty members
 - ⑤ what I saw on the field trip to Chicago
 - ⑤ talking with family members
 - ⑤ perception that my new choice may best suit my personality or abilities
 - ⑤ perception that my new choice might mean better pay in my future (than other CAP programs)
 - ⑤ perception that my new choice may be considered more prestigious (than other CAP programs)
 - ⑤ I have friends in this program, and want to continue with them
 - ⑤ I don't know--I haven't decided yet
 - ⑤ Other, please list:
-

The following shows a comparison of the top tier of influences on student choices of major. (Note that 20% cited other reasons.)

ranking	Freshman, follow-up survey	Sophomore, follow-up survey
1	Learning about diff profess in 100 courses = 74%	Perception that choice is best for personality/abilities = 88%
2	Perception that choice is best for personality/abilities = 69%	Doing projects in studio = 68%
3	Doing projects in studio = 63%	Talking to other students = 50%
4	What I saw on the field trip to Chicago = 57%	Talking to faculty = 50%
5	Talking to other students = 39%	Learning about diff profess in 100 courses = 46%
6	Talking to faculty = 37%	Talking to family members = 35%
7	Talking to family members = 32%	What I saw on the field trip to Chicago = 28%

8	Don't know; haven't decided yet = 17%	Perception that choice means higher prestige = 25%
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Only 52% of the sophomores answered the question of which factor was most important, but the ranking of the top two reasons selected is consistent with the numbers given above.

ranking	Sophomore, follow-up
1	Perception that choice is best for personality/abilities 41%
2	Doing projects in studio 15%
3 [tie]	Learning about diff profess in 100 courses 14% Other 14%
4	Talking to faculty 9%
5	Talking to family 7%

The final questions to the sophomores dealt with how they had fared in their first semester of their degree programs. They were asked about their initial impressions from their First Year experience of the discipline they chose, as compared with the lived experience of their first semester in that major. Almost 80% found that their impressions had been correct; 10% said that there was dissonance between the two, and 11% were undecided. But the percentage expressing satisfaction with their choices was higher, almost 90% affirming their elected major. For this question, the undecided number remained the same, but only 1% disagreed, expressing dissatisfaction with their programs.

IV DISCUSSION + CLOSING

The College of Architecture and Planning at Ball State offers three professional degrees – as distinct from common first year programs that include the fine arts or other programs of study – so disciplinarity in the sense of the vocational professions will be present in all of the years of the program, despite the intent for new students to remain open-minded about their choices until near the end of the spring semester. For programs in this or similar positions the issues of disciplinarity center around four questions that deserve further investigation. First, what is the most valid, constructive experience for entering students of the domains of professional practice that are their futures? Second, of the content and skills that we teach, what is legitimate foundational learning, common to all the disciplines? Are the students being well-prepared to continue in the second year, and beyond, in one of the environmental design professions? Third, does the first year curriculum prepare students for making a good choice among the professions represented in the degree programs? Finally, does a common first year

promote, in the longer term, a better understanding among the professions engaged in shaping the built environment, fostering respect and collaboration in future practice?

This study is an early phase of a longer investigation that will rely on following students through the program, and development of multi-year data. Some of the four issues are being explored by the current survey questions, notably the choice that students make at the end of the first year when they commit to a major. Evidence shows that a remarkably high percentage ultimately feel that their final choice is a good fit, and that a number of them have switched from an initial choice after exposure, in the first year program, to other options.

The current surveys may give some insight into the pedagogy of the professions in the first year – how, when and in what format – but will need to come out of further analysis. In terms of preparation the effectiveness of the first year preparation for the work of second year, data has been collected but not yet analyzed. This inquiry will also benefit from following students through their degree programs, and posing that question in successive years. Whether there is a distinct advantage in common first year programs for students, both in their subsequent work toward degrees, and in their practice as professionals, that increases constructive awareness, respect and collaboration among different professions, will require a multi-year study.

At a fundamental level of satisfaction, what it means when a large majority of students have the conviction that their choice of major “best suits personality + abilities” is not fully clear, and is probably a complex of related factors and experiences. Interviews may be the best tool for further insight, and what it means may also change in the students’ perceptions, as they mature and proceed through the programs. One component of their perceived understanding of the distinctions between disciplines is the projects they encounter in studio, but what aspects of the projects? Is it the scale, the perceived ‘reality’ [and possibly comfort level] of one project, over one that is more abstract – but which gets at conceptual issues, shorn of conventional function and scale issues, in an essential pedagogical way? This is new territory in studying the effects, and effectiveness, of design studio projects.

As a disciplinary and learning construct, common first years are good laboratories, as well as making sense for students. Benefits include exposure to a wider range of possible career choices, and an in-depth experience of the alternatives. Anecdotally, and logically, students make friends in the first year, some who go into the other programs. For the remaining years students are at home in each other’s studios; they speak the same language, and have the bonds forged during their first year. This should foster a continued awareness of the work of other professions that may carry over to professional practice. The benefits of common first years for the environmental design professions usually outweigh the potential logistical and political difficulties that can be inherent in academic settings. We should work toward a better understanding of the benefits of this complex, but effective, pedagogical framework.

Thanks to The Beginning Design Student Conference for inspiring this research, and thanks to Brian Pickerill in the Office of Assessment at BSU, for his help in the design of the surveys, and in the analysis and interpretation of the results.

ⁱ The surveys each asked for additional information, outside the scope of this paper. Briefly, these areas were to help us understand the background and resources of the incoming students. With the end-of-fall survey of the freshmen, we asked about progress in different areas, and for information on perceived effectiveness of different ways of learning. For the sophomores, we asked about their satisfaction with how first year had prepared them for the work they were doing, what they felt adept at, and where they'd like more help.

ⁱⁱ In a series of follow-on questions, they were asked to name an example of each type of project – not tied to the name of a designer -- and describe why it had impressed them. This information has not yet been coded for analysis.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Internet and the search engine Google were invaluable tools for looking up unfamiliar names, as many students named practitioners in their home areas, most who have websites.

^{iv} The student who mentioned *Seinfeld* said that the character George had wanted to be an architect, and the student who mentioned the *Brady Bunch* said the father was an architect and 'had always seemed happy.'

^v While all students in the Common First Year take all three of the 100 series courses, some take two the first semester and one the following semester; for others, the schedule is reversed.

^{vi} Note that the 32% figure for Landscape Architecture declarations is unusually high, and is more typically chosen by 25% - 27% of freshmen at the end of their first year.